

Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution

by William Loren Katz

In the last decade of the 18th century, Toussaint L'Ouverture, led a revolutionary movement that liberated St. Domingue, his homeland in the Caribbean, from colonial tyranny and declared an end to slavery. Toussaint, a self-educated former slave, defeated Europe's best-trained forces including armies from France, England and Spain and France. After securing its independence, St. Domingue renamed itself Haiti and became the first Republic in the world to declare all men and women free and equally entitled to govern their own lives. Toussaint's achievement still ranks as one of the most extraordinary events in human history.

As French citizens jubilantly wrote a Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1791, an even more far-reaching colonial rebellion erupted on St. Domingue (known as San Domingo in Spanish). This island jewel was the world's largest producer of sugar and coffee and the richest colonial possession on earth and was desired by the British who viewed it as compensation for loss of their mainland colonies. Its wealth was produced by over half a million enslaved African women and men imported to labor for French planters. Slavery on the island was so cruel and conditions were so poor that 40,000 newly enslaved Africans were introduced each year.



www.stjohnsinglers.it/.../haiti_toussaint.jpg

The island's 40,000 whites included a wealthy planter class known as seigneurs, French officials, overseers, mechanics and professionals and poor white laborers. Though planters dominated the island's economy, they lived under rules and officials in France. A growing free African and mulatto population of 28,000, many of whom owned real estate and personal property yearned for social equality and their share of public offices. In the early stages of the French Revolution they began to lobby for equality in the French National Assembly and in 1790, rose in a rebellion whose goals was ending discrimination against them and gaining a share of government offices. A mulatto leader named Ogé issued a dire military warning to France that "We will not remain much longer in degradation We can raise as good soldiers as those of France. Our own arms will render us respectable and independent. Once we are reduced to desperate measures, thousands of men will cross the Atlantic in vain to reduce us to our former condition." This revolt was brutally and quickly suppressed, but the next year the island's half a million enslaved men and women began to revolt and seek liberation.

Rebellion in St. Domingue

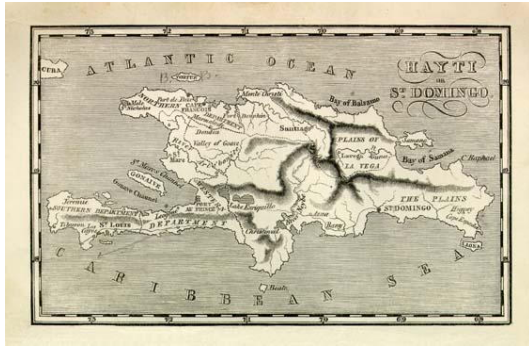
Toussaint L'Ouverture, who led Haitians to independence and freedom, was unusual in a number of ways. He was a Creole, meaning he was born in St. Domingue, a coachman on a large plantation, literate and a Christian. He lived on the Bréda plantation with his wife and three children. At the time of the French Revolution, he was already in his mid-forties, which was unusually old for someone living under such harsh conditions.

As a military leader, Toussaint was idolized by his troops because he led by example and shared their dangers. During the wars, he was wounded 17 times. He also proved to be a military genius, something his foes, trapped by racial stereotypes, failed to grasp. While he kept his armies loyal to France, he forged alliances with foreign powers that kept his foes confused. He never wavered in his pledge to end human bondage and told the five-member Directory who ruled France, "We have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it." In time, Toussaint L'Ouverture won support from the mixed race population, drove Spanish and then British troops into the sea, overwhelmed slaveholders' militia units, and defeated his internal foes. By 1801 L'Ouverture had conquered St. Dominique and abolished human slavery on the island.

When Napoleon Bonaparte gained power in France, L'Ouverture sent him a copy of the island nation's 1801 Constitution. Napoleon replied by dispatching his brother-in-law, Charles Le Clerc, with 16,000 troops to capture Toussaint L'Ouverture, disarm his troops and restore slavery. L'Ouverture retreated to the mountains in the interior and after two of his leading generals, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe, defected to the French, all seemed lost.

Le Clerc offered to negotiate with Toussaint L'Ouverture aboard a French ship, but instead seized him when he came aboard. Toussaint told his captor, "In overthrowing me, you have cut down in San Domingo only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep." Deported to France in chains, he was sent to a cold cell in the French Alps. Denied adequate food and medical help, he died on April 7, 1803. However, when Napoleon reinstituted the slave trade and slavery, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe rallied a popular national liberation movement.

Finally, the war turned against Napoleon when Le Clerc died of yellow fever and war broke out between France and Britain. Napoleon ordered a war against the civilian population designed to devastate the island's economy and exterminate the leading rebels. Scorched earth tactics and retaliations by both sides devastated the countryside and left innocent victims dead or displaced. The tactics of the French armies reinvigorated the revolutionaries, and in November, 1803, they drove the last foreign armies from St. Dominique.



Ripples from the Haitian Revolution

This successful bid for liberty sent shock waves throughout the Americas. In 1795, Africans, Native Americans and some whites at Pointe Coupee, Louisiana, stirred by talk of Haiti, organized to overthrow slavery in New Orleans. Inspired by the people of St. Domingue, Gabriel Prosser mobilized hundreds of enslaved Africans in 1800 to attack Richmond, Virginia. In Jamaica, the British governor warned that “The slaves here are very inquisitive & intelligent & are immediately informed of every kind of news that arrives.” Enslaved people on his island, he noted, “compose” songs about Haiti’s uprising and he was “preparing for the worst.” In Dominica, a British officer warned that enslaved people had to be placated because “the Bomb was ready to burst in every quarter.” The governor reported that his slaves learned about the “Idea of Liberty” through “intercourse” with nearby French islands. In Tobago, officials reported enslaved people vowed “to follow the example of Guadeloupe and St. Domingo.” In Trinidad, a military tribunal arrested conspirators in 1805 and reported “The Negroes are by no means diffident, particularly those who speak French.” The governor feared that a dancing festival would be used to plot “the diabolical scene which led to . . . St. Domingo.”

Slaveholders in the U.S. Congress denounced France and its “new-fangled philosophy of liberty and equality” and called enslaved Africans “the Jacobins of the country, . . . the Anarchists and the Domestic Enemy . . . the destroyers of our race.” Although the revolution in St. Domingue drew inspiration from Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, Jefferson was among U.S. officials who greeted the uprising with horror. As Secretary of State, he declared that they were not freedom fighters, but murderous zealots bent on overturning white supremacy. Jefferson warned that whites were about to be expelled from “all the West India Islands” and worried that Haiti’s “black crews and missionaries” would instigate “bloody scenes” in southern states. The revolution in Haiti also dramatically changed United States history. After Napoleon lost his prize colony, he realized how difficult it would be to defend an overseas empire. When President Jefferson sent emissaries to Paris to purchase New Orleans, a chastened Napoleon offered to sell the vast Louisiana territory to the startled diplomats. The Louisiana Purchase cost the United States four cents an acre, doubled the size of the country and led to a westward movement that would bring dozens of new states.

Toussaint L'Ouverture Addresses the French Directory (1797)

In this letter, Toussaint L'Ouverture warns the Directory (the executive committee which ran the government between the Reign of Terror and Napoleon Bonaparte’s coup in 1799) against any attempt to reimpose slavery in St. Domingue. Source: C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 2d ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 195-197.

My attachment to France, my knowledge of the blacks, make it my duty not to leave you ignorant either of the crimes which they [anti-Revolutionary White colonists] meditate or the oath that we [formerly enslaved Africans] renew, to bury ourselves under the ruins of a country revived by liberty rather than suffer the return of slavery.

It is for you, Citizens Directors, to turn from over our heads the storm which the eternal enemies of our liberty are preparing in the shades of silence. It is for you to enlighten the legislature, it is for you to prevent the enemies of the present system from spreading themselves on our unfortunate shores to sully it with new crimes. Do not allow our brothers, our friends, to be sacrificed to men who wish to reign over the ruins of the human species. . . .

I send you with this letter a declaration which will acquaint you with the unity that exists between the proprietors of San Domingo who are in France, those in the United States, and those who serve under the English banner. You will see there a resolution, unequivocal and carefully constructed, for the restoration of slavery; you will see there that their determination to succeed has led them to envelop themselves in the mantle of liberty in order to strike it more deadly blows. . . .

Do they think that men who have been able to enjoy the blessing of liberty will calmly see it snatched away? They supported their chains only so long as they did not know any condition of life more happy than that of slavery. But to-day when they have left it, if they had a thousand lives they would sacrifice them all rather than be forced into slavery again. . . .

France will not revoke her principles, she will not withdraw from us the greatest of her benefits. . . . But if, to re-establish slavery in San Domingo, this was done, then I declare to you it would be to attempt the impossible: we have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it.

Memoir of General Toussaint L'Ouverture. Written By Himself. (1803)

On June 6, 1802, Toussaint L'Ouverture was arrested by French officials and deported. In his memoir, written while imprisoned in France, Toussaint L'Ouverture defended his actions and demanded fair treatment from Napoleon. He died while a prisoner on April 7, 1803. Source: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/beard63/>

I have neglected nothing at Saint Domingo for the welfare of the island; I have robbed myself of rest to contribute to it; I have sacrificed everything for it. I have made it my duty and pleasure to develop the resources of this beautiful colony. Zeal, activity, courage, I have employed them all. The island was invaded by the enemies of the Republic; I had then but a thousand men, armed with pikes. I sent them back to labor in the field, and organized several regiments, by the authority of Gen. Laveaux. The Spanish portion had joined the English to make war upon the French. . . . General Laveaux ordered me to the attack; I carried it. . . . The English were entrenched at Pont-de-l'Ester; I drove them from the place. They were in possession of Petite Rivière. My ammunition consisted of one case of cartridges which had fallen into the water on my way to the attack; this did not discourage me. I carried the place by assault before day, with my dragoons, and made all the garrison prisoners. . . . I was also exposed to the greatest dangers; several times I narrowly escaped being made prisoner; I shed my blood for my country; I received a ball in the right hip which remains there still; I received a violent blow on the head from a cannon-ball, which knocked out the greater part of my teeth, and loosened the rest. In short, I received upon different occasions seventeen wounds, whose honorable scars still remain. . . . As a reward for all these services, I have been arbitrarily arrested at St. Domingo, bound, and put on board ship like a criminal, without regard for my rank, without the least consideration. Is this the

recompense due my labors? Should my conduct lead me to expect such treatment? . . . It is from the depths of this dreary prison that I appeal to the justice and magnanimity of the First Consul. He is too noble and too good a general to turn away from an old soldier, covered with wounds in the service of his country, without giving him the opportunity to justify himself, and to have judgment pronounced upon him. . . . If I had intended to make war, would I have laid down my arms and submitted? No reasonable man, much less a soldier, can believe such an absurdity.

Experiences of a Young Creole Refugee from Saint Domingue [Haiti]

The name of the young Creole man who wrote these letters to a friend in France is unknown. Althéa de Puech Parham, who translated and edited them, discovered the letters in her family's papers in New Orleans. The young man had been born in Saint Domingue, but then moved to France. His family fled Revolutionary France in 1791, when he was sixteen and traveled to the French Caribbean. For two years, the young man fought in the forces trying to suppress the rebellion. At that point, his family fled to the United States, where he spent time in New York City and New Jersey. He returned to Saint Domingue in 1794 and joined British forces trying to reenslave the rebels and turn Haiti into a British colony. He finally accepted defeat and abandoned the island. His letters offer a unique window into the ideas of slaveholders who are trying to justify the institution of slavery and cannot understand why Africans are demanding freedom. Source: Althéa de Puech Parham, trans. & ed. (1959). *My Odyssey, Experiences of a Young Refugee from Two Revolutions* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press).

Questions and Activities

1. Why is the young man outraged at the injustice against “the poor planters of Saint Domingue”?
2. According to the young man, what is life like for Africans in the Saint Domingue colony?
3. Why does he claim they were happier as slaves in Saint Domingue than as free people in Africa?
4. Whom does the young man blame for the rebellion by enslaved Africans? Do you agree? Explain.
5. Imagine you are Toussaint L'Ouverture or one of the other Haitian rebels. Write a letter to the young Creole responding to his claims.

A. When the events of the [French] Revolution compelled me to leave France, I promised to write you of anything interesting my voyage offered. Now, since nearly two years have fled, perhaps you have accused me of indifference - be it so; I do not merit that reproach. I only disliked adding to your concerns the burdens which have been those of your friend (9).

B. Thirty days after our departure, we saw at dawn the high mountains of Saint Domingue. A few hours later, we got in sight of our habitation [plantation], and we made the usual signal to announce our approach to friends. The young ladies were so delighted, that they wished to fire the cannon, and they acquitted themselves with much courage, placing one hand on the tinder and the other over their eyes. Soon we found ourselves in front of Fort Picolet, which defended the entrance of Cap Francais. The pilot came aboard, and we slipped through the Narrows in full sail (19).

C. The county house of my family is on a sugar plantation, situated between Cap Francais and Fort Dauphin, near a pretty little river and in view of the ocean. Our habitation is almost in the center of a plain 14 leagues long by 3 to 5 leagues wide [about 200 square miles], and near a gentle slope of the mountains to the sea. The entire plain is traversed by an infinite number of little rivers, which overflow after the rains and are only feeble little brooks in the dry seasons. Wide roads connect the plantations, which resemble little hamlets, because of the large number of buildings necessary for the making of sugar and housing of the Negroes [Africans] (22).

D. How often, from what I have seen, have I have been able to recognize the injustice of those written diatribes, that were flooding Europe, against the poor planters of Saint Domingue! What lies! What exaggerated pictures! What ignorance of the country, the customs, the habits, and the laws. During the past months, between the different revolts and insurrections, I have seen everywhere Negroes who were fat, well cared for and happy. I have seen them many times, about a hundred of them occupied with work that twenty Europeans could achieve in much less time. Their cabins appeared sanitary, commodious, and furnished with the necessary utensils for their needs. These cabins were surrounded with land where they raised pigs and a variety of fowl; they had me observe their individual gardens, which were perfectly tended and abundantly planted with all the necessary products of our country. I noticed that the hospital was the finest edifice on each plantation. I was told that a doctor visited them each day and that women looked after the sick. Other women had the care of the children, to bathe, comb, etc. each morning. I often found idle groups, and was told that these were convalescents, nursing mothers, pregnant women, and old people, who were exempt from service. At sunset I heard the bell ring, and noticed that from all directions the workers retired gaily to rest from their labor until the following morning. This same bell recalled the Negroes to the shelter of their cabins when it commenced to rain, and it rains very often here. As for the huge crime of allowing them to go half-nude, I assure you that upon this point I cannot partake in the indignation of the Philosophers [abolitionists]. . . . Thanks to . . . the thickness and oiliness of skin, which Providence has wisely given these races of the Torrid Zone, they can prudently brave the heat which would in a short time kill the European. Moreover, I am convinced that if they go uncovered, it is not because they have no clothing at their disposal (23-24).

E. For those who question the discipline under which they live, it is certainly not more rigorous than that which is observed for soldiers and sailors; and when one realizes that thirty thousand semi-barbaric Africans, one should not hesitate to say that discipline is necessary. The young adult Negroes of our plantation, informed of our return, gathered in a crowd before us, and by a thousand bizarre demonstrations testified to the joy they had in seeing us. Having obtained permission to have a Calinda, they assembled on the greensward in front of our house. They were in their Sunday clothes-and most of them would not exchange this finery for fifty full bottles. In general, the men were dressed in large white pantaloons over which fell a colored jacket. The women wore rather thin dresses and short aprons; their kinky hair was covered by a Madras headkerchief, beautifully tied; nearly all had on necklaces and earrings, and I saw some wipe their faces with very fine cambric (25).

F. The day after my arrival, while partaking with my family of the pleasures of an excellent lunch, a courier arrived to deliver to my step-father, commander of the district in which our property is located, a letter full of the most terrifying news. The slaves, enflamed by emissaries sent from France, had burned the habitations of our neighbors near the Cape, after assassinating the proprietors without distinction of age or sex. Already the insurrection was causing devastation on all sides, and they feared it would soon reach our place of habitation. The report of this terrific catastrophe was widely spread. The frightened families among our neighbors met together at our plantation. The men armed to face the storm; the mothers, wives, sisters were lamenting and gathering in all haste a few precious effects. Desolation and fear were painted on all faces. The sky seemed on fire. Guns could be heard from afar and the bells of the plantations were sounding the alarm. The danger increased. The flames at each moment were approaching and enclosing about us. There was no time to lose; we fled. The victims who escaped at sword's point came to swell the number of fugitives, and recounted to us the horrors which they had witnessed. They had seen unbelievable tortures to which they testified. Many women, young, beautiful, and

virtuous, perished beneath the infamous caresses of the brigands, amongst the cadavers of their fathers and husbands. Bodies, still palpitating, were dragged through the roads with atrocious acclamations. Young children transfixed upon the points of bayonets were bleeding flags which followed the troop of cannibals (27-28).

G. Those unfortunates! What were their conditions in their own barbaric countries from which they came? The picture made by all the voyagers is frightful. Transported to us, they became happier than the peasants of any nation; and not one regretted leaving his savage country. In self-concern alone, it not in humanity, was it not sufficient incentive for the colonists to take good care of his workers that they cost him much, that they rendered so much profits when they were healthy, and that they became so expensive when they were ill. Those whippings of which one hears were always applied by one of their own comrades who had the talent of making more noise than pain, and only for faults which were punished much more severely elsewhere. This method of chastisement was adopted because the African, barely civilized, is considered a child and must be treated as such. . . . Such was the existence of the Negro in the Colony of Saint Domingue. The laws made for their safety were very severe. No doubt with us, as elsewhere, some individuals infringed the laws; . . . it is seldom that a colonist of Saint Domingue can be shown culpable of these pretended crimes that are believed to be common among us, and when they were committed, it was always done by a European. . . . The Creole makes a point of honor of being gentle and indulgent. But if our slaves were so well treated, why did they revolt? One must ask those composers of phrases who have inundated our country with their incendiary writings; those stupid innovators who brought turmoil to France and killed their King. . . One must find the reason, at last, in the character of all the ignorant populace, principally in the Negroes, like machines which can easier be made to start than to stop. These are the causes which started, accelerated, and prolonged the revolt, and destroyed the most beautiful country upon the earth (42-44).

Revolutions in Haiti and Latin America: Similar or Different?

Do Now: Examine the drawing on the right and answer the following questions:

1. Describe what you see in the picture. What imagery is used in this drawing?
2. How do you react to what you see? Where do you think this image might have appeared?
3. In your view, are the Haitians justified in their actions? Explain.

Haiti and Toussaint L'Ouverture

In 1791, a revolt broke out in the French Caribbean colony of St. Domingue. The colony was located on the western third of the island of Hispaniola. The rest of the island was controlled by Spain and known as Santo Domingo.

St. Domingue was one of the wealthiest colonies in the Americas. It produced half of all the sugar and coffee exported to Europe and the United States. This wealth was the result of the work of enslaved Africans who were brutally treated.

The rebellion began when free Blacks and mulattos (people of mixed race) were denied citizenship rights promised by the French Revolution. As the revolt spread, enslaved Africans rose up against their French masters. During the uprising there was cruelty from both sides. Sugar cane fields and plantation houses were burned and captives were raped and murdered.

People of African ancestry outnumbered Europeans on the island by about 10 to 1. In 1794, the National Assembly of France abolished slavery in its colonies, and in January, 1800, Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leading general of the Black revolt, became the undisputed leader of the entire island.



When Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in France in 1799, he tried to rebuild the French colonial empire. In 1802, he sent 20,000 troops to St. Domingue to overthrow the government of Toussaint L'Ouverture and restore slavery on the island. Toussaint L'Ouverture was captured and exiled to France, where he died in prison. However, the rebels continued to fight and by the end of 1803 the French forces were defeated. On January 1, 1804, President Jean Jacques Dessalines declared the birth of the free republic of Haiti.

Many of the White colonists who fled from St. Domingue were opposed to the French Revolution. They escaped to the United States where news of the slave rebellion frightened American slaveholders and led to harsher restrictions on Blacks. In 1793, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson wrote the Governor of South Carolina that Black revolutionaries from St. Domingue might try to "excite an insurrection among the Negroes." In 1799, he warned James Madison that White settlers might be expelled from "all the West India Islands" and that "black crews and missionaries" could instigate "bloody scenes" in southern states. As President in 1804, Jefferson refused to recognize Haitian independence.

Knowledge of the rebellion in Haiti did inspire other enslaved Africans to fight for their freedom. In 1800, Gabriel Prosser mobilized hundreds of enslaved Africans to attack Richmond, Virginia. There were also uprisings in the French colony of Louisiana and the British colony of Trinidad.

The revolution in Haiti dramatically changed United States history in another way. In 1803, President Jefferson offered to purchase the port of New Orleans from France. Napoleon decided to sell the United States the entire Louisiana territory. The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the country and led to westward expansion across the continent.

Questions

1. Why was St. Domingue one of the wealthiest colonies in the Americas?
2. Why was the revolt able to spread so easily?
3. How was Haiti finally able to proclaim independence?
4. How did the rebellion in St. Domingue and Haitian independence influence the United States?

Simon Bolivar, Latin American Liberator

Napoleon's rise to power in France and his conquest of Spain in 1808 led to wars for national independence in Spain's Latin American colonies. By 1822, territory stretching from Argentina and Chile in the south to Mexico and California in the north had secured independence. Simon Bolivar was one of South America's greatest generals and his military campaigns helped achieve independence for the area that now includes Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Panama and Venezuela. He is known as El Libertador (The Liberator) and the "George Washington of South America."

Simon Bolivar was born on July 24, 1783, at Caracas, Venezuela. His family was of European ancestry. As a wealthy young man, Bolivar traveled in Europe. He returned to Venezuela in 1810 and joined local colonists who proclaimed independence from Spain. From 1813 until 1824, Bolivar commanded an army that battled for control over the northern part of the South American continent. In 1819, he headed the congress that organized the original Republic of Colombia (now Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, and Venezuela). He became its first president in December, 1819.

Bolivar's forces finally defeated a Spanish army in Venezuela in June, 1821. Later, he seized control over Ecuador and was accepted as the ruler of Peru. Upper Peru became a separate country and was named Bolivia in honor of Bolivar. While Simon Bolivar is often compared with George Washington, Bolivar accepted dictatorial powers that Washington rejected.

Questions

1. What was the inspiration for the Latin American revolutions in the 19th century?
2. How did Napoleon both inspire revolutionary ideas and extinguish revolutionary actions?
3. Why was Simon Bolivar called the "George Washington of South America"?

Discussion Questions: **In what ways was the Haitian revolution similar to or different from the American Revolution? Were the revolutions in Latin America more like the U.S. revolution or the revolution in Haiti? Is revolutionary violence against an oppressor justified?**

Research Assignment: George Washington, Napoleon Bonaparte, Simon Bolivar and Toussaint L'Ouverture were contemporaries. Examine the lives and achievements of each of these revolutionary leaders. Write a report where you address the question: Should Toussaint L'Ouverture be considered a world historic figure of the magnitude of George Washington, Simon Bolivar and Napoleon Bonaparte?

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